OCKBROOK MORAVIAN CHURCH and Settlement

1750-1975

FOREWORD

Twenty five years have passed since Mrs Elisabeth King, a former Head of Ockbrook School, and Miss Mabel Nelson, a long time member of Ockbrook Moravian Church, deeply interested in its history, wrote an account of the beginning and development of the Church and Settlement on its two hundredth anniversary.

This account has now been revised and brought up to date as the Congregation celebrates its two hundred and twenty fifth birthday. It is essentially the work first published in 1950 with a number of small changes and additions which, we hope, will make the story a little clearer in places and record events since the second world war.

Words written in the original foreword by the Rev. C. H. Mellowes, who was then minister at Ockbrook, are worth repeating: "Alongside the historical sketch is a long story of Christian achievement and spiritual living, of Church faithfulness and enterprise, of educational development and culture, which is still being written. It is a heritage to cause gratitude and pride, and to encourage stimulus and invigoration in the congregation life of today among all our people".

Alan McGibbon
Fred Linyard

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The Village

The village of Ockbrook has a long history, but it is the story of the lives of ordinary people rather than of the great events that fill most history books. Details of its land and tenants are recorded in the Doomsday Book of 1086. It was then a hamlet in the sheltered hollow by the brook with a Manor House, a very plain simple building. At the time of the Norman Conquest, the manor of Ockbrook passed from a Saxon land-owner, Tochi to a Norman baron, Geoffrey Alselin.

When the Moravians came to Ockbrook in the eighteenth century, they settled in a district known as "the Hill", on the edge of the village. It seems to have been their custom to choose high ground for their settlements. At that time, the Hill was practically roadless, with a few farmhouses surrounded by fields.

Coming of the Moravians, 1740.

In 1739, an Ockbrook man, Isaac Frearson, was in Nottingham on business. Passing the Market Cross, he stopped to listen to a preacher. This was the Rev. Jacob Rogers, curate of St. Paul's, Bedford, who had already come into close contact with the Moravians in London. He was evidently a man of marked personality and Frearson was so much impressed that he invited Rogers to Ockbrook, where he preached in Frearson's barn.

This was a time of very low spiritual life throughout the country. In Ockbrook itself, many people seem to have had little knowledge of Christianity. They were poorly housed, badly fed and the health of the community was deplorable. Tubercolosis was rife, infant mortality high and the expectation of life short

Outbreaks of smallpox were common and the survivors of the scourge must have been badly marked for life.

In the early days of Moravian work here there was no doctor nearer than Derby and he was sent for only in cases of great emergency. The Brethren's Labourer ('minister' he would now be called) kept a store of simple remedies and dispensed them himself to the best of his knowledge. The only precaution recorded was that the body of one who had died from smallpox was not brought into the chapel before the burial.

Into such a community came the first of the Moravians with the message of the Gospel like a cleansing, invigorating wind.

The Moravian Church

The Moravian Church (officially 'Unitas Fratrum' or 'The Unity of the Brethren') had its birth in 1457 in Bohemia among the followers of the Church reformer, John Hus. The emphasis was on simplicity in life and worship; Christianity was for them primarily a life to be lived in obedience to Jesus Christ, rather than a set of doctrines that had to be believed. For nearly two hundred years, the Church was active in Central Europe, in spite of opposition. Then came a period of intense persecution, during which the brethren were driven underground. In 1722, refugées from among them, from Bohemia and Moravia (hence the present name of the Church) settled on the Estate of a certain Count Zinzendorf in Saxony. Here they built a village to which they gave the name of 'Herrnhut'. Here the Moravian Church came to new life.

Herrnhut became a centre for missionary work, sending out men and women to bring Christianity to the slaves of the West Indies, to the Eskimoes of Labrador, to the Red Indians of North America and to many others. In the process of travelling, Moravian missionaries made contacts in England, where they had considerable influence on John Wesley. It was not the intention of the Moravians to set themselves up as a separate Church in England, but many Societies were formed of men and women seeking greater reality and depth in their religious life. A few of these Societies eventually became Churches, but for the most part, members of the Societies remained members of the Church of England and continued to attend their own Parish Church. For this reason, the Moravian Church in England remained a small denomination, though recognised in 1749 by Parliament as 'an ancient, protestant, episcopal church.' The stronger provinces of the Church today are in the former mission fields, especially in Tanzania, the West Indies and North America.

This non-proselytizing policy led a number of Anglican clergymen, concerned about the spiritual poverty of early eighteenth century England to ask the Moravians for help. Thus it was that in 1740, John Töltschig, who was helping with the work in York shire came to form Societies in Nottingham and Ockbrook in an attempt to strengthen the new Christian concern aroused as a result of the preaching of Jacob Rogers.

A Congregation Established, 1750

In the latter place, during the next ten years, many of the inhabitants became members of the Society. At the end of that time some of these expressed an earnest wish to form a Congregation. This was not lightly agreed to as it was against the original principle that had been laid down. Peter Bohler, at that time Superintendent of the work in Britain, came from London, spoke individually to the people concerned and eventually yielded to their plea. At a solemn meeting in Mr. Wallis' house in Green Lane on September 24th, 1750, a Congregation of the Moravian Church was formed.

After many difficulties, the estate of Isaac Frearson was bought by the Brethren on March 2nd, 1751 and on July 3rd the foundation stone of the present church was laid. An entry in the Diary for March 13th reads: "A certain person came to me and offered Dale Abbey to us if we would buy it and pull it down, saying it would build us a fine chapel." The offer was not accepted though it is said that some dressed stones from Dale are in the foundations.

Some of the local people were still not reconciled to the idea of a new church in their village. It is recorded that they tried to prevent the builders getting the necessary bricks and on the night of July 14th, some persons came and pulled down several rows of bricks that had been laid and caused considerable damage. In spite of this opposition, the building was completed and consecrated on April 5th 1752. Services began at 8 a.m. and continued through the day. At the main public ceremony, it was estimated that over a thousand people were present.

John Ockershausen

From 1750-1757 the Minister of the congregation was John Ockershausen. No praise can be too great for the zeal and self-sacrifice of this first Labourer and his wife. In addition to their duties in Ockbrook they served Nottingham, Eaton, Belper, Sileby, Wolverhampton, Sheffield, Duffield, Draycott and Wilne, Dale, Spondon and lesser places. They made the journeys on horseback (she riding pillion) or on foot, in all weathers, and at times they returned home wet to the skin and "exceeding sick". On November 6th, 1751 their horse fell on the Common, into a deep pit and they under him, but scrambling out they made their way home and next day found them on the road again. As with the Ockershausens so with their successors; they lived dedicated lives.

Routine and Discipline

The aim of the Brethren was to make of each congregation a "village of the Lord". Each hour of the twenty-four had assigned to it by Lot a man and a woman volunteer to pray for that period; these were the Intercessors. The members of the Congregation must conduct themselves in such a way as to conform in all particulars to God's Will. To this end every matter of importance, even so personal a one as a betrothal, was submitted to the direct decision of the Lord by means of the Lot. To the Lot were put three courses, affirmative, negative, blank. Either of the first two answers closed the matter, the third allowed of a further trial at a later date. Discipline was strict in the congregation and deviation from the standard laid down usually meant dismissal from its membership.

Trouble from "the Town"

Meantime trouble had arisen between the "townspeople" and the newcomers. In order to assist in setting up the Community, a number of young men and women had come from other places, especially from Yorkshire. The law of the time made the Parish in which a pauper was "domiciled" responsible for him and a person was "domiciled" who lived one year in a parish. The "townspeople" of Ockbrook could not see how strangers who had come in, especially the unmarried men and women, could earn their living, and were in constant dread of their being chargeable to the Parish. A certificate of place of original residence was demanded from each so that at the first sign of poverty such an one could be moved on. At length, after threats of mob violence, an agreement was signed between representatives of the Brethren and the Churchwardens by which the former took all responsibility for such of their immediate circle as needed maintanance.

The Chapel, 1752

The Chapel building was rectangular in shape, without porches and with a whitewashed interior. The pulpit was on the north wall and the organ - when one was bought in June, 1752, from a Minister in Overton for 25 guineas - was placed in the gallery. The lighting was by candles in metal wall brackets; in the course of years oil lamps superseded candles and gas was first used on September 30th, 1869. There is no reference to heating in the early days of the Chapel but the "stoves which had lately been got.......were lighted for the first time on Sunday, March 6th 1842". Subsequent references show how much they were appreciated.

The people were summoned to service, or the death of a member was announced, by the blowing of "French horns". Not until 1760 was a Bell used for the hours of worship and even then the use of the horns persisted for many years longer. The Clock with its bell, now in use, bears the date 1827. It was made by Whitehurst and Son, of Derby, and there is a tradition that the inhabitants of the village subscribed to its cost on the understanding that the Moravians maintained it.

The Burial Ground

On the day following the consecration of the Chapel, Bishop Bohler selected for a Burial Ground the plot of land still so used though it has lost the cruciform arrangement of the paths then designed.

With the building of the chapel the first Minister's House behind the Chapel came into existence. The present Manse was occupied by the Minister in 1822.

Choir Houses

It was the custom of the Moravians to divide the members of the congregation into sections or "choirs" according to sex or state. In the case of the unmarried, those who wished lived together in Choir Houses according to their sex and earned their living by whatever form of work was available at the time.

In August 1757, the project of building a House especially for the Single Brethren was undertaken and on the "Great Sabbath," April 14th, 1759, the house was ready for consecration; on that same day the foundation stone of the Single Sisters' House was laid. The Brethren's House is believed to have stood on the site of, or near, the present walled garden of the school and their orchard extended over the land where there is now a row of houses.

Early Industries

The trades practised in these houses were various. In the men's were wool-combing, worsted weaving, shoemaking, cabinet making, silk stocking weaving. One of their trades has left its name to Bakehouse Lane.

The Sisters spun cotton to work up into stockings, embroidered on silk stretched on frames called tambours, and excelled in fine white needlework. Tradition has it that their most spectacular order was the dress made for Queen Adelaide, wife of William IV. This was of delicate muslin with a design of roses and ivy round the hem and, on a smaller scale, on the bodice. The design was never to be used again.

From time to time the Sisters found themselves in great straits, for provisions were very dear owing to the almost continous background of war, and when the London fashions changed the bottom dropped out of their market.

By such means as these the men and women supported themselves and had something over to help the common cause. Parents brought young boys and girls to be entered into these houses, to be taught a trade and brought up in godly ways. Over the women was a "Single Sisters' Labouress", over the men, a "Single Brethren's Labourer".

With the change in the industrial conditions of the 19th century the Brethren's House gradually fell into disuse and it has now completely disappeared. The Single Sisters House is still represented by the three houses at the top of the Settlement terrace.

Travel

In the latter half of the 18th century Ockbrook was the central point of the Moravian Church in England. There were constant comings and goings between Fulneck and Dukinfield to the north and Bedford, Bristol and London to the south and Ockbrook was a natural halting place for the travellers. When the distance was reasonably short the men performed the journey on horseback. The cheapest conveyance was the slow, lumbering carrier's waggon; the speediest and most expensive the post chaise drawn by one horse; even the journey from Tytherton in Wiltshire to Ockbrook took three days. The stage coach supplied the needs of the majority. Inside seats were uncomfortable enough but the poorer passengers who travelled outside had to hold on precariously by strap or rail. Though the hey-day of the highwayman was passing the roads were still dangerous; the ancient Roman Ways were in a state of dilapidation and no other roads existed. The diaries record instances of near-tragedies to Brethren who were travelling; in 1771 the coach in which the Minister and Assistant were returning from Synod in Chelsea was overturned at dead of night but they escaped with little hurt. In a later year Brethren coming from the south were in a coach which overturned three times during the night. Their plight on lampless roads, ankle deep in mire and full of potholes, can be imagined. The opening of a railway from Nottingham to Derby, with a station at Borrowash, on June 4th, 1839 was the beginning of a new order of things.

The Shop

The desirability of having a Congregation Shop had been felt from early times but it was not easy to raise the necessary capital of £150. By 1768 this had somehow been managed and though its ups and downs were numerous such a business survived for many years. To the credit of the organisers it must be said that the strictest rules for honest trading, best quality goods and reasonable prices were laid down. In time it ceased to be a

"Congregation Shop" though the property remained in Church hands and was let to successive private traders, of whom the last was John Orchard who died in 1927.

"The Brotherly Agreement", 1777

In 1777 there was drawn up "The Brotherly Agreement and Declaration concerning the Rules and Orders of the Brethren's Congregation at Ockbrook". This is a moral code by which all matters secular and spiritual in a Christian Congregation are to be adjusted. It is a simple, concise expression of high ideals. To mark its acceptance by the Congregation it was signed by a member held in great esteem, Daniel Gingell, who was for thirty years in the bakery business of the community.

Until the second half of the 19th century it was customary to draw the attention of applicants for membership to the standards set forth in the terms of this agreement.

Planta, 1780

Reference has been made earlier to the lack of a doctor in Ockbrook. It is not until 1780, when a certain Brother and Sister Planta came here, that a recognised medical man is recorded as living in the place. The Plantas had for twenty years been missionaries in Jamaica and on the flyleaf of his hymn book, which is still in existence, he writes himself down as "Jacobus Petrus Planta, surgeon". For thirty five years Planta laboured in Ockbrook as preacher, physician and surgeon, On March 18th, 1781, there is the remarkable information that he inoculated two girls and two women against smallpox. This preventive measure had been known in London since 1718 but its use in a village must have required courage on the part of both operator and patients. Unfortunately nothing is known of its success or failure in this case, or of Planta's attitude to vaccination when Dr. Jenner discovered it fifteen years later.

By way of contrast, on one occasion when Planta was laid aside by a severe attack of gout, a Derby doctor had to be brought for a very sick man and his treatment of the poor invalid was to bleed him, blister him and give him a purge.

Schools

With the great tradition behind them of John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), Bishop of the Moravian Church and educationalist, it was natural that schools for boys and girls should be of primary importance to the Brethren. As early as 1751 a little day-school for girls was begun by the Single Sisters and successive small schools are mentioned in the Diaries over a long period of years. The day-schools functioned only in the spring and summer months as the roads were often impassable for children in the winter.

The end of the century brought a demand for a Girls' Boarding School as distinct from the school in the Sisters' House. This was eventually located in the house, built originally for another purpose, adjoining the Sisters' House and next to the Chapel on the East Side. For about seventy years these two schools existed side by side until on the death of Miss Robinson, governess of the "Ladies School" in 1873, the Sisters House was closed as a Choir House and Miss Liley, governess of the school then became headmistress of both establishments.

A Boys' day-school was begun in 1806 but was more difficult to maintain, perhaps because of the need of trade apprenticeship for boys. Later a Boarding School was more successful as it was not dependent upon local children. It was opened in temporary quarters in 1813 and for it the older portion of what is now the Girls' School was built in 1821-22. In 1908 the newer end of this building was erected for a Headmasters house. This school continued until Easter, 1915, when the Headmaster was transferred to Fulneck. The Girls' School then removed to the quarters thus vacated. It attained its 175th Birthday in 1974.

Growth of the Settlement

To return to the gradual growth of the Settlement the Brethren built their own malting house in 1792, traces of which may still be seen under the present Lecture Hall. The Inn (now "Greenside"), adjoining was ready for occupation six months later and George Holme and his wife were its excellent first tenants. People of all degrees and from many places came to Ockbrook for the good of their health and spent considerable time at the Inn.

In 1813 a Mrs. Bates came to Ockbrook, from Blackheath to see if she would like to make it her permanent residence. She was a person of very considerable means who travelled frequently between the north of Ireland, South Wales and places in England, always intent upon the welfare of the Moravian Church of which she remained, all her life, a generous benefactor.

As one of her gifts to Ockbrook she enlarged the Inn and modernized the shop. Unfortunately, she never occupied the house (now known as "Broadstairs") which she ordered to be built.

Church Headquarters, 1825

The Synod of 1825 took the momentous decision of moving the administrative body of the Moravian Church, the Provincial Helpers' Conference (now called Provincial Elders' Conference) from Bedford to Ockbrook and here it remained until 1875, by which time the ever increasing claims of our Foreign Mission Fields made it imperative to have Headquarters in London. Ockbrook was a busy and important place during those fifty years.

Sunday Schools

In 1831, a Sunday School was begun for our children which was to be attended to by a "select number of our Single Sisters" and was evidently for girls only; not until 1848 is there mention of a Boys' Sunday School. These schools were probably conducted in the Prayer Halls of the Choir Houses, until on September 29th, 1867, the new Church Hall, known as the Lecture Hall, was "dedicated by a simple service". The newer wing at the west end, nominally the Girls' Sunday School, was built in 1880. The useful kitchen premises were the gift of Mrs. Harriet Mallalieu at a later date.

It may be mentioned here that the house now known as "The Grange" was built in 1867-68 by the Rev. William Mallalieu of the P. H. C. His work for the Brethren's Church and for Ockbrook in particular was a great service.

Chapel Alterations

From time to time alterations were made in the buildings until the Settlement as we now know it took shape. In the chapel the pulpit was removed from the north side to its present position. Extensive structural changes were made about the years 1875 - 76 and in 1895 the oft-expressed desire of the Congregation to have the organ downstairs was fulfilled and it was played in its present position on Communion Sunday, March 3rd.

Bishop Ellis

Bishop Ellis's ministry occupied the years 1894 - 1920. His great energy took him all over the Province in the work of the Church, despite his blindness, whilst his friendliness and geniality gave him a share in every good work in this district.

Two World Wars

The 1914-18 war fell as a shadow upon the Congregation; the young men whom the Bishop had gathered round him were scattered through all the fields of war, and daily life was limited as had never before been known. The Lecture Hall and Sunday School buildings were given over to the Red Cross as an Auxiliary

Hospital of the 5th Northern General Hospital and the Sunday-School Classes and weeknight work were carried on as well as might be in the house now known as "Highfield", then untenanted.

When Peace came the Congregation set to work to revive the organisations. In October, 1929, the Chapel was lighted by electricity; in 1932, the premises, including the Settlement road were renovated and in 1933 the organ was rebuilt.

When the second World War came the Congregation had again to see its young men go into the Forces and its older members of both sexes taking up new duties in the reception of evacuees and in measures for the protection of the public against the dangers of air raids.

Two Hundred Years and after.

In 1772, after the Anglican Bishop had visited Ockbrook, his Report noted that "Ockbrook had a hundred families, none of note and there were no Papists in the Parish or any perverted to Popery. There were neither Quakers, Presbyterians, Independents, Anabaptists nor Methodists, but there were some Moravians from distant places - none of rank - whose numbers were lessening of recent years".

No doubt the good Bishop would be surprised to know that after two hundred years, the Moravian Church is still very much a part of Ockbrook life and continues to serve the people of Ockbrook in many ways. One of the marked features of recent years has been the close co-operation between the local churches and the development of the Ockbrook and Borrowash Christian Fellowship. Regular united services are held and through the Fellowship a number of projects have been organised to serve the needs of the district.

During the past twenty five years, Summer Schools for young people have been held at Ockbrook most years. The proximity of School and Church has made it a favourite spot for these and other residential conferences. In this way, Ockbrook has continued to serve the whole British Province of the Moravian Church. Residential Synods met here in 1954, 1961 and 1970.

In 1957, Ockbrook joined with the world-wide Moravian Church in celebrating the five hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Church, by presenting a pageant, 'The Victory of Faith'

In recent years, the Children's Lovefeast and Christingle Service on Christmas Eve has attracted very large congregations. The Harvest services, with imaginative displays, are also worth noting. It is not only on the big occasions, however, but through, the regular weekly worship of the congregation that its life is nourished. There are many fellowship groups for different ages. Through the young people's groups especially the Church reaches out to many who have no direct contact with any Christian Church.

Large scale immigration from the West Indies to this country brought many West Indian Moravians to England. Among the Societies that came into being as a result of this was one at Leicester. This work was linked with Ockbrook in 1969, when the Ockbrook minister was asked to be in charge of the work at Leicester. Since that time there has been a happy relationship between the two groups.

This is an age when Christians in Britain are a small minority but the Moravians at Ockbrook continue to witness to the Faith handed to them through two hundred and twenty five years of faithful Christian living.